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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 002444

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SOTO CANO AIRBASE TO BECOME COMMERCIAL AIRPORT?

Classified by PolChief Francisco Palmieri, Reasons 1.5
(b) and (d)

1. (U) Summary: On August 15, President Maduro announced his intention to convert the Soto Cano military airstrip into an international airport for commercial use. The Comayagua business community embraces the concept, which seeks to transform the area into a new commercial center with an eye toward bolstering a flailing economy. Maduro reiterated that the airstrip will continue to be used for military purposes and suggested that U.S. authorities have already agreed to the conversion--although no one at the Embassy has discussed the matter with the Administration. At a Comayagua Chamber of Commerce forum, Minister of Government and Justice Jorge Ramon Hernandez Alcerro and President of Congress Pepe Lobo extolled the benefits of a conversion, giving this initiative high-level political support. End Summary.

THE U.S. PRESENCE

2. (U) Since 1982 the U.S. military has shared the airbase at Soto Cano (commonly known by Hondurans as Palmerola--the name of the town previously located on the site) with the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF). Currently, Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-Bravo) is the guest of the HOAF on the base; houses more than 600 U.S. troops; and employs more than 700 Hondurans. Through salaries, contracts, tourism and donations, JTF-Bravo contributes approximately \$17.5 million annually to the economy (primarily in the Comayagua valley).

3. (SBU) JTF-Bravo's initial mission was to deter Nicaraguan aggression--thereafter its duties included regional counternarcotics, humanitarian and civic assistance operations. Recently, USCINCSO appointed JTF-Bravo as the central coordinating authority for U.S. military operating within the region--including Honduras, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Panama. JTF-Bravo conducts joint, combined and interagency operations, and supports contingency operations throughout the assigned area to enhance theater-wide operational security and reinforce regional military cooperation.

4. (SBU) JTF-Bravo is the first responder to crises in the region, and it conducts operations in support of counternarcotics and counterterrorism missions. Moreover, it conducts and supports recovery and evacuation operations in Central America (CENTAM). Additionally, the task force is charged with providing a C-5 capable airfield (the only one of its kind in Honduras), base support for joint combined exercises and unit training, theater deployable surgical team, all-source intelligence, operational footprint for immediate reaction forces, and maintains pre-positioned stocks for theater-wide military operations. Secondarily, JTF-Bravo conducts and supports humanitarian civic assistance and military civic action operations, supports USAID and provides base support for joint combined exercise training, exercises, and unit training.

CONVERSION IN THE OFFING?

5. (U) In mid-August, President Maduro announced that he is considering the conversion of the airstrip at Soto Cano, enabling the facility to be used by commercial airlines. He was careful to make clear that the airstrip would continue to be used for military operations. (Note: Since the HOAF shares the base with the U.S. military, the airstrip is also used by the HOAF. End Note.) Maduro indicated that he wants an airport for the city of Comayagua (the one-time capital of Honduras, adjacent to Soto Cano) in order to strengthen the economy of the Comayagua valley and create a new center for commercial activity in Honduras.

6. (U) Maduro emphasized that if commercially available, the airport could be extensively used for carrying cargo

for exportation--including mangos and other produce(especially oriental vegetables, which require special handling), tilapia, and cleaning products produced in the area. Moreover, he opined that commercialization of the facility would increase the potential for industrial development in the region--including "maquilas," which are currently found primarily in the San Pedro Sula area. He also mentioned the possibility of constructing a four-lane highway from Comayagua to Puerto Cortes (on the north coast) and between Tegucigalpa and Comayagua. (Comment: A new international airport in Comayagua and highway to the capital could prompt U.S. air carriers to provide cargo and passenger services in central Honduras. Currently, such service is restricted at Toncontin Airport in Tegucigalpa due to limits on the size of planes that can safely land there. However, post notes that construction of a four-lane highway between Comayagua and Tegucigalpa is highly unlikely in the near future given the high cost and technical difficulties of building such a road. End Comment.)

17. (U) The Comayaguan business community strongly favors the conversion of the base airport to accommodate commercial flights. The Comayagua Chamber of Commerce and local authorities have developed specific plans for such a conversion at Soto Cano.

SUFFICIENT POLITICAL SUPPORT?

18. (U) On August 22, the Comayagua Chamber of Commerce hosted a forum in which the potential airport project was discussed by local authorities and business people. Both Minister of Government and Justice Jorge Ramon Hernandez Alcerro and President of Congress Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo Sosa attended the event and expressed support for the project. Hernandez Alcerro described the project as the realization of a vision for the future first conceived by the Spanish conquistadors. He suggested that the region is a natural commercial center due to both geography and local economic interests. He pointed out that the project would complement the Plan Puebla-Panama regional economic integration and would further the goal of uniting the region with a "backbone" for commercial transportation. (Comment: The public support of high-level, powerful political figures such as Hernandez Alcerro and Lobo is indicative of the robust backing that exists for the creation of a new international airport, either in Comayagua or closer to Tegucigalpa. End Comment.)

19. (U) Lobo said that he had no doubt that such a project would be a success. Lobo stated that he is confident that the natural resources, the climate and the infrastructure of the Comayagua valley are conducive to the success of a commercial airport component at Palmerola. Additionally, he pointed out that it would contribute to decentralization(a goal of Maduro), which would relieve Tegucigalpa's problems with water shortages and unmanageable population growth. Lobo pledged that Congress would consider the project proposal and do whatever is necessary to achieve the project objectives. The Comayagua Chamber of Commerce is seeking a meeting with President Maduro in the near future in order to pursue the airport issue in depth.

COMMENT

10. (C) It is difficult to say what the ramifications of a commercial airport would be to JTF-Bravo. The initial readout of Post staff is that such a conversion would probably have little effect on the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano. In fact, an expansion of the runway facilities could benefit JTF-Bravo by making it possible for larger, fixed-wing aircraft to use the airbase. All parties involved recognize that the U.S. military is present at the invitation of the Honduran government, and it is yet to be determined whether or not the U.S. Department of Defense would have any objections to the commercialization of the base airport.

11. (C) Presumably, a commercial terminal would be built separate and apart from the military facilities. Moreover, any such project would need to include careful planning in order to not impede the military functions that must be carried out at Soto Cano--both U.S. and Honduran. A variety of security and safety issues would be raised, including the appropriate level of air traffic control that would be needed. Additionally, a combined military-civilian airport raises security concerns and costs--particularly in light of heightened worldwide airport security that has been implemented since September 11.

12. (C) Finally, there remain internal political issues to be sorted out--including longstanding competition between Tegucigalpa and Comayagua. Powerful business interests in Tegucigalpa have not yet weighed in on the issue publicly, and there is a heavyweight political presence in the capital city and in San Pedro Sula that can be expected to vehemently oppose shifting commercial power to the Comayagua valley. Tegucigalpa Mayor Miguel Pastor has already announced his opposition to the plan. Post anticipates that domestic political and commercial competition will affect the manner in which Maduro's airport plans proceed.

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